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ABSTRACT

This research reports on a descriptive study conducted by interviewing 18 U.S. history teachers of eighth-graders in seven middle schools in a Pacific Northwest school district. The volunteers were from middle-class suburban schools with an average of 15 years teaching experience. The research questions focused on: (1) What strategies do social studies teachers use to motivate students to learn U.S. history? (2) What reasons do these teachers provide to explain their use of particular motivational strategies? and (3) What implicit theories do the teachers hold about the goals of their instruction? and (4) How do their goals for U.S. history instruction relate to their use of motivational strategies? The study showed the five most frequently mentioned strategies were simulations, projects, games, historical novels, and relating history to the present. A sample of the teachers' students expressed a desire for strategies that encourage active participation and suggestions for teachers to make the study of history more realistic. Findings suggested that teachers need to make the U.S. history curriculum motivating by including supplemental activities. Contains 16 references. (EH)

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Motivational Strategies and Implicit Theories of Social Studies Teachers

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Abstract

A sample of 18 U.S. history teachers at the middle-school level were interviewed to determine how they motivate students to learn. Their five most frequently mentioned strategies were respectively: simulations; projects; games; historical novels, and relating history to the present. A sample of the teachers' students expressed a desire for strategies that encourage active participation; and they stated that if they were teachers, they would make the study of history realistic. Teachers expressed the belief that their strategies are motivating because they address students' needs for affiliation, autonomy, play, and physical activity, and because they provide realistic representations of historical events. Surprisingly, there was little connection between teachers' instructional goals and their motivational strategies. The findings suggest that teachers make the U.S. history curriculum motivating by including supplemental activities to make instruction interesting and appealing, rather than by trying to make the subject matter relevant.

How do I motivate these children? How can I hold their attention? How can I help them understand the value of learning history? Many social studies teachers ask these kinds of questions, because they have serious concerns about how to motivate students to learn. One possible explanation for poor student motivation may be that for decades, students at all grade levels from elementary school through high school have rated social studies as one of the least-liked subjects in the curriculum (Shaughnessy & Haladyna, 1985). This student negativism may be frustrating for middle school teachers in particular, because research demonstrates that negative attitudes are most intense as students advance through middle school (Fraser, 1981; Yamamoto, Thomas, & Kerns, 1969). Therefore, the identification of effective motivational strategies for this population of students is an important problem for research.

A review of the research literature only revealed a single study that focused on how social studies teachers motivate their students. Brophy and Merrick (1987) conducted an experiment in which middle-school social studies teachers were trained to employ motivational strategies in seventh- and eighth-grade classrooms. The researchers systematically reviewed the literature on motivation in order to develop strategies that teachers could integrate into the instructional process. The use of strategies did not produce the expected improvements in students' motivation and achievement. The researchers attributed these results to methodological problems and poor implementation of the experimental treatment.

A limitation of the Brophy and Merrick research design was that it did not seek information from teachers about the strategies and beliefs that they had most frequently used over time and that were part of their regular teaching style. This oversight may account for teachers' resistance to

implement specific strategies. The investigators appeared to be unaware of teachers' beliefs until they realized that teachers were not following treatment guidelines.

The present study sought to determine how and why teachers used particular motivational strategies. The major purpose of this study was to characterize how social studies teachers at the eighth-grade level motivate students to learn U.S. history. The eighth-grade level was chosen because generally the curriculum focuses on U.S. history. The prevalence of U.S. history instruction makes it a particularly worthwhile subject within the domain of social studies instruction upon which to focus research. The following research questions were addressed by the study:

1. What strategies do social studies teachers use to motivate students to learn U.S. history?

2. What reasons do these teachers provide to explain their use of particular motivational strategies?

3. What implicit theories do the teachers hold about the goals of their instruction? And how do their goals for U.S. history instruction relate to their use of motivational strategies?

Middle-school students in particular find social studies instruction uninteresting and the subject matter irrelevant (Fraser, 1981; Yamamoto, Thomas, & Kerns, 1969). Students react adversely to the passive methods (e.g., teacher-dominated lecture) with which the subject is commonly taught and express preferences for instructional methods that engage them actively in learning (Schug, Todd, & Beery, 1984; Weible & Evans, 1984). In addition, students seldom perceive any connection between their own lives and the people and events in history. In a review of research on relevance, VanSickle (1990) concluded that without perceived linkages and a sense of potential

usefulness, students are unmotivated to learn social studies. Therefore, teachers have immediate needs to employ strategies that enhance student motivation in their classrooms.

Brophy (1987), Keller (1983), and Wlodkowski (1978) have performed extensive reviews of the literature to develop motivational strategies to be integrated into the instructional process. These strategies seem applicable to classroom teaching, but their recommendations are general. What teachers need is research on what works in real teaching situations in particular subjects at specific grade levels.

Procedures

The research design for this study was descriptive in nature. The study did not have a particular time frame. Instead, I asked teachers about the strategies and beliefs they had internalized over time and that were part of their regular teaching style.

I interviewed eighteen U.S. history teachers at the eighth-grade level in seven middle schools located in a Pacific Northwest school district. They volunteered to participate in schools located in middle-class suburban neighborhoods. The nine males and nine females had a range of from three to 20 years of teaching experience, an average of 15 years of teaching experience, and an average of seven years of experience teaching U.S. history at the eighth-grade level.

The interview protocol included the following questions that attempted to probe teacher thinking about the use of motivational strategies:

- What strategy do you use to motivate students to learn U.S. history?

For each strategy named ask:

- Can you give me an example of how you did this?

• Why do you think this strategy motivates students?

Perhaps the most important way of understanding teachers' motivational strategies is to think of them as methods to achieve particular instructional goals. The assumption here is that teachers have more-or-less explicit instructional goals and that they select motivational strategies because they believe these strategies will help students achieve the goals. To provide data for this type of analysis, teachers were asked the following question:

• What are your goals of U.S. history instruction?

The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed. Four coders analyzed the transcripts to produce inductively derived categories. We discussed disagreements and reached consensus on all coding. The data were analyzed by simple frequency distributions.

Of the eighteen teachers who were interviewed, thirteen gave permission for their students to complete a questionnaire about the use of motivational strategies in the classroom. To obtain a representative cross section of students, I tried to draw a sample that consisted of an average of about five students from each classroom. I administered a questionnaire to a random sample of 60 students consisting of equal numbers of boys and girls. Students' responses were coded in the same way as that of their teachers.

The first question asked students to corroborate what their teachers had identified as strategies they used to motivate students in order to validate the teachers' reports. Students were informed that teachers often use certain methods to motivate students to learn U.S. history. They were asked if their teacher used each method. (The word "method" was used rather than the word "strategy," because students at this grade level seem to be more familiar

with "method.") In fact, the methods listed on the questionnaire were those identified by each student's respective teacher.[1]

In addition, students were asked the following questions:

• Look at the methods used by your teacher. Identify the <u>one</u> that motivates you the most to really want to learn U.S. history.

• If you were the teacher in this class, what methods would you use to motivate students to learn?

Results and Discussion

Strategies Reportedly Used by Teachers

Table 1 contains the ten most frequently identified motivational strategies; each strategy is identified by at least five of the 18 teachers.

Insert Table 1 about here

Simulation heads the list; all but three teachers mentioned it as a strategy they use to motivate their students to learn U.S. history. Simulations encapsulate in simplified form the essential elements of real-life, historical situations and present these elements to be dealt with by the students. The following is typical of the highly favorable comments that teachers made about a simulation designed to draw students into colonial life:

> The children are actively involved discovering a colony similar to one in New England. The activities resemble experiences like those of the pioneers. The children involve their whole selves as they think and feel like the pioneers.

The use of projects (11) also requires students' active participation. Teachers mentioned that many students are motivated to use their hands to create finished products, such as videos and dioramas. This strategy

encourages students to make things that are in some way related to the topic being studied. In addition, some teachers identified the element of student choice as a motivator during projects. Students often make choices about topics of interest and about group members with whom they work.

As Table 1 indicates, eight teachers reportedly use games that require students to review recently acquired information. Some teachers mentioned that games based on popular television programs (e.g., Jeopardy) generate enthusiasm, enjoyment, and activity.

Table 1 shows that eight teachers reportedly use the strategy of assigning students to read historical novels. Teachers reported that the details of daily living and the vivid descriptions of character and setting help students to picture themselves in historical times.

As shown in Table 1, eight teachers reportedly use the strategy of relating historical events to current events or to students' lives. For example, one teacher conducted a discussion with his students about the right to bear arms. He related this right, guaranteed by the fourth amendment, to a shooting incident that involved an acquaintance of one of his students. In other cases, some teachers claimed to make the content more relevant by showing how it relates to the lives of students.

The most striking feature of the list of motivational strategies in Table 1 is that the strategies are not rooted in the usual patterns of social studies instruction, namely, textbook-based, large-group, teacher-controlled recitation and lecture. In other words, it appears that teachers do not root their motivational strategies in conventional instruction; rather, their strategies involve activities that supplement conventional instruction.

Do these strategies, in fact, motivate students to learn U.S. history? One way to check the effectiveness of the teachers' use of motivational

strategies is to determine whether they correspond to the recommendations of experts as expressed in the literature. Based on an extensive review of the literature, the teachers are using the range of motivational strategies suggested by practitioners in the field (Brophy, 1987; Keller, 1983; Wlodkowski, 1978).

Students' Beliefs About the Teacher's Use of Motivational Strategies

Students were asked to indicate whether their teacher used each method that other teachers often use to motivate students. An analysis of the data revealed that students corroborated each strategy in Table 1. The use of a strategy was considered to be corroborated if 50 percent or more of the students in a classroom identified the same strategy named by their teacher.

Next students were asked to identify the one method that most motivated them to learn. They identified role-playing characters in simulations (13) as the most motivating strategy used by their teachers. Interestingly, simulations also were the motivational strategy most often mentioned by teachers. In addition, some students indicated a preference for this strategy for the same reasons as their teachers. One student indicated that simulations provide a more realistic representation of a historical event:

> The simulation with patriots and loyalists really taught me about the revolutionary war because you felt like you were there. I felt like fighting as a patriot. I really had strong feelings.

Participating in group discussions (nine) followed simulations on the list of most motivating strategies. Students indicated that they want to exchange ideas with peers and relate ideas to their own experiences during discussions. The use of discussions was not reported by teachers, perhaps because they are anxious about noise and disorganization often associated with this strategy (Gall & Gillett, 1980).

Finally, students were asked, "If you were the teacher in this class, what methods would you use to motivate students to learn?" The most frequently mentioned strategies were the following: acting in dramatic presentations (18), watching videos and films (11), and playing games for review (10). These strategies were also mentioned by many teachers. This correspondence of teacher data and student data provides additional evidence that the strategies motivate students to learn.

Teachers' Beliefs About Why Particular Strategies Are Motivating

The list of motivational strategies in Table 1 provides direct guidelines for teachers. By this I mean a teacher could look at the list and get ideas for teaching social studies. However, the list would not inform them why these strategies are motivating. But for teachers to be professionals, they need to know both what is effective, and why it is effective. For this reason, I collected data on teachers' implicit theories of student motivation. It is important to know teachers' theories because these theories--not formal scientific theories--guide teachers' classroom practices (Clark & Peterson 1986).

The teachers' main reason for using strategies appears to be to address their students' needs for affiliation, autonomy, and physical activity. Teachers also believe in the importance of using strategies that connect instruction to students' personal experiences. What students learn from an activity is determined largely by their experience, which provides the information that enables them to bring meaning to the historical events they study. We know that personal meaning, or relevance, is inherent in subject matter only to the extent that students have sufficient prior experience that they can relate to it.

If students' prior experiences are inadequate for bringing meaning to new information, teachers can use participatory experiences, such as hands-

on activities and projects that require finished products. For example, one teacher assigned students to construct a canoe in the classroom, so they had some experiential basis to relate to Native American culture.

Teachers also believe that providing vicarious experiences (e.g., simulations, novels, videos) is motivating, because they help students to construct vivid mental images of situations that are absent from present experience. For example, one reason that teachers believe simulations are motivating is they give students the thoughts and feelings of living through an experience. Another possible reason for the motivating effects of simulations is that the role playing enables students to identify with a situation they might not be willing to consider or examine so extensively through the medium of textbook print and photographs. Similarly, some teachers mentioned that historical novels are motivating, because they provide visual descriptions; and that videos and films motivate students by providing them with clear images to understand the realities of history.

Another finding from the teachers' explanations is their belief that children need opportunities to play. Starting with Dewey (1938), progressive educators have long advocated that school learning activities should be more play-like. In addition, the teachers' beliefs about using strategies to provide students with play and other vicarious experiences has some basis in the theoretical work of Piaget (1951). Early Piagetian work on fantasy and play focused on the cognitive structuring and elaboration that elements of play add to otherwise more mundane and literal tasks. And finally, when teachers add a play-like quality to learning activities, students may feel some measure of control over their school learning.

The Strategy-Goal Connection

The final interview question asked teachers about their beliefs concerning the goals of U.S. history instruction. The purpose of this question is to determine the connections between the teachers' uses of motivational strategies and their approach to the U.S. history curriculum. Table 2 groups their responses into the following categories: student understanding of cause-and-effect in history; student understanding of specific individuals, groups, and events; and development of student self-concept and thinking skills.

Insert Table 2 about here

The data show that almost half of the teachers (eight) want their students to learn that events of the past affect the present and future. One teacher, who favors the use of questioning as a motivational strategy, made the following comments about how her strategy and instructional approach are related:

> I try to pose a really stimulating question, maybe draw a parallel between something that happened in history and something right now in our community. Current events are in the world right now. Those things are tied back to historical themes. Those common threads weave a pattern throughout history that makes sense.

The second most frequent type of comments involved helping students to understand that historical events can be seen and understood in different ways. Teachers used the term, "multiple perspectives" to emphasize that the "voices" of women and minorities have been omitted from history. Consequently, they provide content about a variety of cultures throughout U.S. history.

There were only five comments about the development of student self-concept and thinking skills. Teachers do not stress social relations and self-

awareness. In addition, teachers made only two comments about using the curriculum to foster thinking skills.

Teachers did not make comments about the general goals of a U.S. history course. Only one teacher's remarks reflected the position that U.S. history instruction should help people to get along well with others. There were no comments about students developing expanded awareness of the world around them. There was only one mention of preparation for citizenship, a key unifying concept in most formal rationale statements about social studies. Teachers did not comment about the significance of understanding social issues or solving the problems we face. Finally, teachers were not explicit about helping students to appreciate the value of U.S. history as a subject of study (Brophy, VanSledright, & Bredin, 1993).

In summary, surprisingly there appears to be a minimal connection between teachers' use of motivational strategies and their instructional goals, perhaps because many teachers in the sample were originally trained as elementary teachers and thus did not have specific training in U.S. history instruction. Another possible explanation for the lack of connection may be that teachers at the middle-school level usually are more oriented toward students than subject matter. An exception is their strategy of relating historical events to current events and students' lives. One teacher summarized this approach succinctly:

> History is a story of real people doing what we do. I want my kids to learn a lesson and apply it to today.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that teachers make the U.S. history curriculum motivating by including supplemental activities such as simulations and student-centered projects, rather than by trying to make the textbook more

interesting. The data show that teachers attribute less importance to the relevance of subject matter than to their attempts to stimulate student interest with a variety of motivational strategies that students may find interesting. However, it remains unclear whether aspects of U.S. history can be made inherently interesting, or whether the teacher must make the subject matter relevant to the students' interests.

The strategies in Table 1 appear to be those that the teachers actually used, and they appear to be effective in motivating students. Nevertheless, research needs to be done to determine the extent to which teachers use the strategies they claim to use. It may be that teachers use these strategies, but inappropriately or too infrequently to have an effect.

To summarize teachers' beliefs for using certain motivational strategies, I have phrased their beliefs as a set of propositions:

1. Provide activities that help students (a) to perceive realistic representations of historical events and realistic portrayals of historical figures, and (b) to visualize clear images and descriptive details of historical events.

2. Provide opportunities for student active participation that include social interaction, hands-on experiences with finished products, and physical movement.

3. Provide opportunities that allow students to perceive a sense of control in their learning activities.

4. Make learning relevant by relating the content to the students' needs, goals, interests, values, and experiences.

The findings of this study should be of particular interest to social studies teachers at the middle-school level, especially beginning teachers for whom motivation of students is a major concern (Veenman, 1984). The data

suggest that training for teachers should focus on the goals of social studies instruction. The diverse instructional goals for U.S. history in this study suggest that this is an ambiguous field of instruction. This ambiguity may exacerbate the motivational problem, because students simply do not know what is expected of them.

The major educational importance of this study is that it suggests directions for future research. The methodology of this study should also be used at different grade levels. The findings would show the extent to which the context of the classroom influences the teachers' use of particular strategies. Finally, experimental research should be done to provide a rigorous check of the effects of the motivational strategies identified in this study. If the research findings are positive, the motivational strategies can provide a strong foundation for redesigning the U.S. history curriculum.

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Footnotes

[1]Survey instruments were produced in 13 different versions, one for each teacher. An example of one version is shown below.

Listed below are methods and examples that teachers often use to motivate students. Please indicate by writing an X on the line if [insert name of teacher] uses that method.

Students:

a. play the roles of people such as patriots or loyalists in an event that actually happened or in an imaginary event that could have happened.....__

b. read historical novels about events such as the Revolutionary War.....__

c. watch videos or films.....__

d. do small group projects that involve displays, models, or skits.....__

e. play games to review information.....__

Table 1

Strategies Used By Teachers to Motivate Students to Learn

Strategy	Number of Teachers Mentioning Strategy
1. Have students role-play characters in simulations.	15
2. Organize projects that result in the creation of products.	11
3. Play games with students for reviews.	8
4. Assign students to read historical novels.	8
5. Relate history to current events or students' lives.	8
6. Use thought-provoking questions.	6
7. Invite guest speakers from the community.	6
8. Show videos and films.	5
9. Organize cooperative learning activities.	5
10. Provide small-scale hands-on experiences.	5

Note. The interview format used in this study enabled the teachers to identify as many strategies as they wished.

Goals	Number of Teachers Mentioning Goal
Development of Student Self-Concept and Thinking Skills	
Help them to relate effectively with other students.	1
Add to the framework that helps students to understand what is happening in their lives.	1
Teach students that they are a viable part of how the U.S. functions.	1
Instill an interest to think critically about information.	1
Teach students how to find information, so they can learn independently.	1

Table 2

Teachers' Beliefs About the Goals of U.S. History Instruction

Goals	Number of Teachers Mentioning Goal
Student Understanding of Cause-and-Effect in History	
Help students to understand that events of the past affect the present and future.	8
Teach central themes and issues.	3
Teach concepts as separate threads of continuity (e.g., conflict, interdependence).	3
Present cause-and-effect situations, so that students see the "whys" of history.	2
Help students to understand the interconnectedness of events.	2
Student Understanding of Specific Individuals, Groups, and Events	
Provide opportunities for students to gain multiple perspectives on historical events.	5
Emphasize events during time periods, such as the Civil War and reconstruction during the mid 1800's.	2
Offer opportunities to create and investigate to gain an in-depth understanding of specific people and events.	1